

A Gift For Mike by PureShores

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Summary:

Lucas, Dustin and Will come up with the perfect Christmas gift idea for Mike. But giving it to him might be a little more complicated. Fluffy, feelgood holiday goodness packed with Mileven.

A Gift For Mike

Author's Note:

This is my take on a Christmas fic, which I don't normally do, but I wanted to try and write something that wasn't dripping with angst for once.

I want to give a shout out to pathvain aelien, whose story 'A Cunning Plan' kind of gave me the idea for this piece. I urge you to check out her whole catalogue of Stranger Things fics if you haven't yet-they're sensational.

Another shout out goes to BrownEyesParker, a confidante, a sounding board, and a dear friend. She too is a talented writer, and I just know you'll love her work.

Please enjoy.

"Comic books?"

"He's already got a million of them."

"Junk food?"

"There's more food in his kitchen than any of ours."

"Video games?"

"I'm sorry Dustin, did I just become a millionaire in the past five seconds?"

Christmas was coming. The air was crisp and cold, with that kind of sharpness that meant snow was on the way. Lights twinkled in the town square, and in the windows of houses, looped around Christmas trees bedecked with ornaments. Another year come and gone, and what a year it had been. Demodogs, and Mind Flayers and El, back from the dead, but not really because she'd never been dead, just lost. Pain and loss, and also new friends and happy reunions. Just another

weird ass year for Hawkins, Indiana. This was two years in a row now. Surely, they were due for a break.

It was the week before Christmas, and Will, Dustin and Lucas were gathered at the Byers', drinking hot chocolate and waiting for Mike to arrive. His mother had dragged him out Christmas shopping for the morning, and despite his pleas, he hadn't been able to get out of it. Of course, all three of them knew that the true source of his annoyance stemmed from the fact that he'd planned to go and visit El today. Hopper had decreed that she would still be on lockdown for the next year, but had grudgingly allowed them all to visit her occasionally. This had been the result of insistent begging from Mike, and they suspected, El herself.

Today was a designated 'El day.' That meant Hopper had organised to be at home to allow the others to spend the day with El. They'd had it planned for a week, but then Mike's mom had demanded he accompany her to the store and no amount of arguing would change her mind. In the end, Mike had asked if they could all meet at Will's house and then go over to the cabin together in the afternoon. He wasn't about to miss out on a chance to see El.

This proved convenient, as it gave the others a chance to discuss what they should get him for Christmas. Mike was notoriously difficult to buy for. He was always gracious, and genuinely happy with every gift they gave him, but each year it got trickier. He already had *so much*. Mr Wheeler had an important job and made a lot of money, so Mike and his sisters had never wanted for anything (as far as toys and games were concerned anyway.) Buying presents for him was tough.

Dustin put down his empty mug and leaned back against the couch with a sigh of frustration.

"Seriously guys, we go through this every year. We have *got* to start planning earlier."

"We'll come up with something," said Will, calmly. "We always do."

"Okay," Lucas pressed his fingers to his temples to try and stave off the headache he could feel coming on. "Let's take it from the top."

What does he like?"

"Star Wars, the arcade, D&D, pizza..." Dustin began rattling off the same list he did every Christmas and birthday, and Lucas and Will both listened apathetically, waiting for inspiration to strike. Nothing did.

"Oh, and let's not forget the one thing Mike likes more than anything else on the planet....El," Dustin concluded, with a smirk. "We could just stick a bow on her head and send her over to his house. It'd be the best present he ever got."

Lucas snorted at that, as Will and Dustin both laughed. It was true, after all. Their lovesick best friend tended to be the butt of a lot of their jokes recently. They'd laid off him throughout most of the year, as it had been pretty clear how much he'd been struggling, but now she was back, and safe, it seemed okay to see the humour in the situation. And there was plenty of humour to be found. It was like another person invaded Mike when he was around El. He stumbled over words, blushed constantly, and seemed to lose control over his arms and legs, tripping over things, and generally making an idiot of himself. It was hilarious.

But El didn't seem to care. No matter how much of a fool Mike made of himself around her, she still looked at him like he was Batman, Superman, Wolverine, and Captain America all rolled into one. Ironical really, considering that she was the real superhero of the party. It was almost cute in a sickening kind of way. She and Mike were both in such awe of one another it was like neither of them could believe the other existed. But they had always been like that; almost from the moment they'd first set eyes on each other.

Occasionally, Lucas envied them for that. It had been simpler for them. Not *easier*, that was for sure, but simpler. Mike liked El and El liked Mike, and that was that. Sure, there were monsters and bad men and the pain of being separated, but whatever they went through, they were always able to count on the knowledge that they were in it together. They both felt the same. They were a team. Mike-and-El, a package deal, two for the price of one.

And then there was Lucas, and Max. But it hadn't been *just* Lucas and

Max. There were complications. There was Dustin, and Billy, and school, and Mike, and secrets to be kept. There was the fact that she was hard to read, and you could never really tell what she was thinking. He liked that a lot about Max, she was mysterious. El was an open book. If she liked you, you knew about it. If she didn't like you, you knew about it. If you had threatened someone she cared about and made her angry, you *really* knew about it.

Max however, was private about her emotions and her thoughts. You had to work to find out what she was thinking. But it was worth it.

He didn't say it out loud. He wasn't Mike, with stars in his eyes and his heart on his sleeve, who didn't care if the whole world knew how amazing he thought El was. Max knew what Lucas thought about her. And that was enough.

He'd planned her Christmas present with care. He'd picked out some new stickers for her skateboard, and then asked Mike to help him create a new D&D 'zoomer' character for her, even though she'd never shown any real interest in playing. That wasn't really the point, however. He just wanted her to feel like she was truly one of them. She deserved it.

It was hard to find the right moment to give it to her. As a rule, the party generally travelled in a pack, to the arcade, the movies, to each other's houses. The only exception was El's place. Max didn't go with them there. El had made it very clear that she wasn't welcome. *That* was a problem they'd all have to tackle soon. Lucas suspected it had something to do with El's fear of being replaced; he could identify it because he'd gone through the same thing last year when she'd first come along.

Max was in California right now, spending the Christmas break with her dad. Maybe next time they all went to the arcade he could get her alone for a few minutes. The others would be distracted by the video games and maybe if he was feeling extra bold, he might take her across the street for a soda or something. Then he could give her the present, away from prying eyes. At least that way, if she hated it, he'd only have to withstand the ridicule from her, and not the others as well.

It was always kind of awkward, when the two of them were alone, but (at the risk of sounding as sappy as Mike) it was also the greatest feeling ever.

And then it hit him.

The one thing Mike would want, more than anything in the world.

“Guys!” he said excitedly, cutting off Dustin, who was half-heartedly suggesting they all pitch in to buy Mike some expensive D&D strategy manual. “I’ve got it.”

The other two turned to him expectantly.

“Well, you kind of said it already, Dustin,” Lucas said. “Mike’s favourite thing in the world is spending time with El, right?”

“Right,” said Will and Dustin, in unison.

“But haven’t you guys noticed, they’ve never actually been alone since she came back? They’re always with us, or if we’re not there, Hopper is. Even at the Snow Ball, there was a shit-ton of people around the whole time.”

“Yeah...” said Will, slowly.

“So?” asked Dustin.

“So maybe we can try and talk Hopper into giving them a pass, just for a couple of hours. Mike’s too chicken shit to ask himself, because he thinks Hopper will cut him off from her completely, but we can do it for him!”

In theory, the idea was perfect. Mike would love it, and it wouldn’t cost them a dime. Carrying it out would be a different story, and Will and Dustin were dubious.

“Are you crazy?” said Dustin. “I was kind of hoping to be alive for Christmas, and for the next few years at least!”

Will was a little more tactful. "It's a good idea, Lucas," he said, carefully. "But don't you think it might be a little hard to do? I mean, there's a reason things are set up the way they are. Mike gets that, even if he doesn't like it much. I don't think Hopper will go for it."

"He might," Lucas argued. "If we ask him the right way."

There was a knock at the door then, and Mike burst in. "Sorry I'm late," he said, breathlessly. "Christmas shopping is the worst. Come on, let's get to El's place!"

With Mike leading the charge, they got to Hopper's cabin in record time. He'd been several steps ahead of them the whole way, urging them every few minutes to hurry up, because she'd be waiting for them. She clearly had been, because the door was flung open the moment they knocked on it. Predictably, she threw herself at Mike in a hug that nearly knocked him flat.

"Mike! I thought you weren't coming!"

"I know, El, I'm sorry. I had to do something with mom and—"

He was cut off when she pulled him to her for another tight hug.

"I missed you."

Mike smiled at her. "I missed you too."

"Do you think she even knows the rest of us are here?" Dustin asked Lucas in a stage whisper, and they both snickered quietly to each other.

"Hey, your hair's getting longer," said Mike, to El. The others weren't sure he even realized what he was doing when he tucked a few errant strands behind her ear.

"Do you like it?" she asked, self-consciously.

"*Oh Mike, tell me I'm beautiful,*" said Lucas under his breath to Dustin, who batted his eyelashes at him in response, prompting more laughter.

“Guys!” hissed Will.

“Relax Byers, we could be doing a tap dance out here, and those two wouldn’t notice,” said Dustin, witheringly. To prove his point, he pointed discreetly to where Mike was assuring El that a) her hair looked great, b) he would like it as long as *she* liked it and c) she was the greatest thing that had ever walked the earth, made the birds sing, and the sun shine, and yadda, yadda, yadda.

Well, c) was sort of implied but that was the gist of it, and El was glowing under his praise as though nothing and nobody in the known universe could measure up to the approval of Mike Wheeler.

The sound of a throat clearing made Mike and El spring apart as though they had been burned. They both turned to look at Hopper, Mike guiltily, and El defiantly, but he didn’t make any comment, except to say, “It’s cold out here. Let’s get inside.”

Mike hastened to obey, and as he scurried inside, El stepped forward to greet Lucas, Will and Dustin, who all gathered her into a big group hug. She beamed around at them all happily, genuinely thrilled to have them there, and they beamed back. El was like that. Her moods were infectious.

“I’m glad you could come,” she said, happily. “I like it when you come to visit.”

The rest of the afternoon passed peacefully. They watched a movie, played some card games, and ate the sandwiches Hopper had resentfully made for them all.

“Your mother would never forgive me if I’d had you here all day and not fed you,” he groused to Will, as he handed him the plate. “How is she, anyway?” he added, would-be-casually. Dustin, Mike and Lucas all took extra-large bites of their sandwiches in order to keep from laughing. Chief Hopper was many things, but he sure wasn’t subtle.

Kind of like Mike really, Dustin observed, as he saw his friend take a nervous glance at the Chief, then upon finding the coast clear, he reached under the table for El’s hand and squeezed it. El smiled at him dreamily, but let go in a hurry when Hopper turned back around.

Their flushed cheeks were a dead giveaway, and the Chief narrowed his eyes at Mike.

“Hands to yourself, Wheeler!” he barked. And so it went on, for the rest of the afternoon. Anytime Mike and El seemed able to get a millisecond alone together, there Hopper would be, looming from seemingly nowhere to break it up. Dustin was impressed at Mike’s ability to keep his temper; he’d seen him snap at far smaller provocation than this. Clearly he’d decided a little El was better than no El at all. Still, he looked far from impressed when Hopper shipped them all out promptly at 7pm, without allowing him so much as a hug goodbye. El looked equally disappointed as she waved them off, and Dustin could tell that even though she enjoyed their company she would have liked nothing better than to spend some time with Mike, alone. Sometimes she was still a little nervous around the other guys, worried that she didn’t understand certain phrases or concepts, and she didn’t feel comfortable asking anybody but Mike to explain it to her. It had been clear that she had missed him the most while she’d been gone. When she’d stepped through the Byers’ door that night, she’d had eyes only for him.

But even then, they’d had an audience. Even in that first wonderful moment of reunion, they’d still been at the mercy of eight pairs of curious eyes. Not a moment of privacy, not a single moment just for themselves.

It was clearly driving them crazy.

In a contrast to El’s quiet sadness at their departure, Mike was in a foul mood the whole way home, grumbling darkly about the Chief under his breath, and it was a relief when he left them to head back to his place.

“Dude,” Dustin caught Lucas’ arm as the latter made to follow Mike. “I think you might have been onto something with the idea for the present. And it wouldn’t just be a gift for Mike; it’d be for El too. Let’s do it.”

“Are you sure?” asked Lucas, a little surprised at the sudden change of heart.

"I know you saw what I saw today. They're both miserable. They need it," said Dustin, firmly. "And so do we. I don't know how much more of this I can stand to watch without hurling."

They met the next day, minus Mike, to discuss the plan of attack. For this to work, there was one formidable obstacle that needed to be overcome: Hopper. He had to agree. Which meant they had to ask him. Which meant that somebody had to be game enough to bring the subject to his attention.

There wasn't exactly a rush of eager volunteers.

Hopper was a good guy. They knew under all the gruffness and eye rolling and grumbling that he only wanted what was best for El. And *this*, whatever he might think, was what was best for her. Anyone who had seen her around Mike knew it was true; at least anyone who wasn't trying to protect their brand-new adoptive daughter from the wickedness of boys and dating. But this was *Mike*, for Christ's sake. He'd throw himself in front of a speeding train before he'd hurt El in any way. They just had to get Hopper to see that.

Still, they continued to sit around the Byers' kitchen table, eyeing each other silently, all secretly hoping someone else would volunteer themselves for the job.

Finally, Dustin spoke.

"This was your idea, Lucas," he pointed out. "I think you should do it."

"Me? No way! He doesn't even know me that well." It was true. They were seeing a lot of each other these days because he was always home when they went to visit El, but that didn't mean that they were getting to know each other any better. Hopper rarely interacted with them directly when they were at his place; instead tending to hover in the background, studying case files or reading the paper. He was always around, but not specifically *with them*. "If anyone, it should be Will," said Lucas. "He likes you the best anyway."

Will went pale. “No, he doesn’t!”

“Yes, he does,” said the other two, together. “He’s at your place all the time,” Dustin argued.

Will rolled his eyes. “Yeah, but not because of *me*. He comes to see my mom, you know that.”

Will wasn’t sure how he felt about that. He liked Hopper well enough, and he had been a big help to them during the past year. He knew it had been good for his mom to have someone around that had really understood what they were going through. But there had also been Bob, and Bob had also been good. And now he was gone. He knew his mom missed him, and so did he, sometimes. The idea of Hopper taking his place, it just didn’t sit right with Will. Of course, with Bob’s loss still so raw, nobody had actually said anything about that actually happening, but it was in the air. He’d just have to wait and see. But if it were what his mom wanted, he would find a way to be okay with it. She deserved to be happy.

“Yeah, and what better way to win over your mom, then to win over you?” asked Dustin, teasingly.

“Shut up, you guys!” Will snapped, and the uncharacteristic sharpness of his tone saw Dustin and Lucas briefly exchange glances, and then drop the subject.

“In that case,” Lucas turned to Dustin. “I think you need to take one for the team, Dustin.”

“What?” Dustin’s eyes bugged out with horror. “Why me?”

“Nobody’s got a bigger mouth than you,” said Lucas, flatly. “Either you’ll convince him it’s a good idea, or you’ll annoy him so much he’ll agree just to shut you up. Either way, it’s a win-win.”

“Maybe for you,” Dustin muttered grumpily under his breath.

“Just think how happy Mike will be if we pull this off, ” said Lucas, bracingly. “He’ll owe us for the rest of his *life*. Imagine all the great stuff we’ll be able to make him do for us.”

Dustin paused in his complaining to consider that possibility. Sensing weakness, Lucas nudged Will, who picked up the thread. "And don't forget, this present is for El too. She deserves something great, after this year."

It was perhaps a bit of a cheap shot, bringing El into the mix, but it had needed to be done. She'd had such a shitty life so far, and had fought so hard, and faced so much. She had saved their lives (some more than once) and there wasn't much else she wouldn't do for them, if necessary. So they seized any opportunity they could find to try and return the favour. They owed her that much. And to be honest, they were all a little softer on El than they probably needed to be. She'd proven time and again how tough she was, and they had no doubt that she could take care of herself if it ever came down to it, but she had a way of making people fall all over themselves to try and look after her.

Personally, Lucas thought it was the big puppy-dog eyes that did it. Even he wasn't completely immune; though of course, nobody was as susceptible to them as Mike.

Dustin crossed his arms in defiance of this slightly underhanded tactic by the other two, but his mouth was twitching, a classic Henderson tell. He was giving in.

"Fine," he said, after a minute or two of this. "I'll do it. But if he murders me, neither of you jerks will be getting your hands on *any* of my stuff. It's going with me to the grave."

When Flo had announced there were 'several young boys' in the station who wanted to see him, Hopper had expected the worst. He expected stories of monsters and terror, and his heart had actually skipped a beat or two in fear that something might have happened to his kid, as if she hadn't already been through enough.

But they assured him that wasn't the case as they filed into his office and shut the door behind them. He also noticed, as they took seats opposite his desk that the Wheeler kid wasn't with them. That was

unusual, he seemed to be the leader and the spokesman of his little ragtag crew, and so it was strange to see them without him. It also begged the question of where he actually was.

If it turned out he were at the cabin with El, alone, he'd kill him.

"Mike has relatives over for dinner tonight," explained Will, correctly interpreting the Chief's silence. "He's at home."

"OK, then."

It wasn't that he didn't like the kid, or that he didn't think Mike had good intentions, but there was an old saying about 'good intentions' and 'roads to hell' that was a little too close for comfort.

He folded his arms, as he eyed the three of them. "Well?" he prompted.

It seemed that Dustin was to be today's mouthpiece for the boys as he glanced nervously at the other two, and then spoke, with an unconvincing air of confidence.

"Well Chief, I bet you're wondering why we came here today. I mean, other than your excellent company, and the lovely Florence at the front desk." He summoned what Hopper supposed was intended to be winning smile.

Hopper didn't smile back. Next to Dustin, Lucas winced.

Dustin gulped, but attempted valiantly to move past the misstep.

"As you know, Christmas is coming up," he went on. "And we've been trying to figure out what we should give to Mike for his gift."

Well, that explained Wheeler's absence.

"And we came up with something great, but we kind of need your help to give it to him."

"You want me to lend you money?" asked Hopper, incredulously. The kid had nerve, he'd give him that much. But why the hell was he talking to *him* about this and not his mother, or Steve Harrington?

The two were quite the double act, these days. “Not a chance in hell, kid.”

Dustin went red, then rather white, desperately looking to his friends for help. When he didn’t receive any, he ploughed on.

“Not *that* kind of help,” he said hastily. “It’s not something you can buy. Well,” he corrected himself, “I guess you *can* buy people under certain circumstances but it’s totally illegal, and really wrong, and I’d never do it and I’d never ask you to do it...”

He continued to babble on as the other two kids looked on in horror. For his part, Hopper wasn’t following Dustin’s train of thought at all, except for certain concerning words such as ‘illegal’ and ‘wrong’, which were blinking in his head like neon signs.

“You want me to help you steal something?” asked Hopper, gesturing to his uniform and badge. “You do know this is not a Halloween costume, right?”

Lucas clapped a hand over his mouth, but couldn’t quite suppress the laugh that bubbled up at the utterly poleaxed look on Dustin’s face. “Oh, God no,” said Dustin. “That’s not what I’m saying. It’s just that I don’t know how to ask you, and you’re sitting there staring at me and it’s kind of creeping me out and-”

“What the hell are you talking about, kid?” Hopper demanded to know, cutting off Dustin’s monologue.

“We want to know if you’ll give Mike permission to do something with El on their own.”

Nobody was sure who was the most surprised when Will’s voice quietly broke into the discussion. Will himself seem bewildered by his own daring, as the other two turned to look at him, Dustin seeming relieved. Lucas nodded at him encouragingly.

“We know why the rules are in place,” Will continued. “And we get it, but Mike really, *really* misses her. And we know she misses him too.”

Hopper couldn’t deny that was true. El was always upset when her

friends left the cabin after a visit, and had taken to asking for Mike frequently during the week between visits. Once or twice, she'd all but begged him to allow Mike to come over on his own, to no avail. And it was no secret that the separation from Mike had been one of the hardest things she'd had to deal with this past year.

"Just this once," Dustin appeared to have found his voice again. "Just for a little while, for Christmas. We can get him toys and junk food and all that crap, but we think this is what he really wants. *Please* let us do this for him."

"And for her," added Will.

Hopper wasn't really sure what to think as he considered the request. After all, he had his reasons for having things arranged the way they were, but on the other hand, it was Christmas, El's first real Christmas, and he knew that getting the chance to see Wheeler would make her happy. In spite of himself, he also found that he was actually quite impressed at the three of them coming here to try and plead Mike's case. God knew he wouldn't have been this considerate at their age. If he'd had a friend in the same situation, young Jim Hopper would have probably just laughed at them, rather than do anything about it. He'd been a jerk as a kid, and after he'd lost Sarah, he'd been a sub-par adult. Until El came along.

This would make El happy, and if there was one thing he wanted for his adoptive daughter, it was for her to be happy, and to get the chance to be a kid before it was too late.

He leaned back in his chair and surveyed the three boys over the rim of his coffee mug, smiling to himself as they fidgeted nervously around, waiting for his answer.

Christmas morning at the Wheeler house was a somewhat subdued affair. Sure, there was Mom's artfully designed Christmas tree, carols on the radio, a cheerful fire in the fireplace, and the usual mountain

of gifts to be unwrapped. But there was also Dad, asleep in the La-Z-Boy, Mom, pretending not to be angry with him, and Mike and Nancy, pretending not to notice the tension. But they all kept smiles on their faces and excitement in their voices, for Holly's sake if for no other reason. She was in her element, with all her family together (a rare thing, these days) and squealed in delight with each new present, going around the room to hug them all, when the last one was unwrapped.

As he carried his presents up to his room, Mike's thoughts turned to El. How was she spending her first official Christmas Day? He pictured her and Hopper in their little cabin, maybe with a string of lights on the wall, eating Eggos and maybe watching a Christmas movie on TV. He hoped Hopper had gotten her a gift or two.

This afternoon, they were all going over there to visit El and exchange their gifts. He hoped he'd be able to find a moment to give her his in semi-privacy. It was a necklace with a snowflake on it (not particularly expensive, though Nancy had chipped in a little,) that he hoped would remind her of the Snow Ball. She didn't have to wear it if she didn't want to, but he wanted her to have something that would let her know that he was always thinking about her, even when they were apart. *Especially* when they were apart.

He didn't dare say all this to the guys and Max of course, who would use it as an excuse to mock him until they were in college. But still, he was looking forward to seeing her.

Hopper had offered to drive them all there, the thick snow not conducive to riding their bikes. At around two 'o clock, Lucas came over from his house, carrying his bagful of gifts, ready to hand them out. He wished Mike a merry Christmas, grinning at him in a strange way. Like he knew something Mike didn't.

"What's with you?" asked Mike, suspiciously, and Lucas only grinned harder.

"Oh nothing," he said. "Can't a kid be happy at Christmas?"

Ten minutes later, Hopper arrived, and the two boys made to jump into the backseat, but Hopper stopped them.

"You can ride up front with me, Wheeler," he said. It wasn't a request. Nervously, and feeling as though he'd much rather be cloistered in the back with Lucas, Mike took the passenger seat, and avoided Hopper's eye as they drove to Dustin's place.

The drive from the Henderson's place to the Byers' house was uneventful, unless you counted the uncontrollable laughter coming from the back seat, which seemed to reignite every time Dustin and Lucas made eye contact. And weirdly, the Chief didn't even scold them. In fact, he almost seemed amused himself.

Something strange was going on here.

Did Mike have something on his face? It would be just like him to have overlooked some grotesque zit with his head full of thoughts of El. He examined his reflection as best he could in the wing mirror, and couldn't see anything obvious out of place. But still the giggling continued until they reached Will's house.

Will was waiting for them on the porch when they pulled up, and waved enthusiastically at them all.

Hopper stopped the car, but didn't turn off the engine. "Everyone out," he said, and Mike looked around in confusion. Weren't they going to the cabin now? Had Hopper changed his mind? Mike didn't want El to be alone on Christmas Day while the rest of them were hanging out together. Really, this was taking overprotectiveness to a whole new level. He was just turning to Hopper to tell him so when the Chief waved a discouraging hand.

"It's the end of line for those two," he said, indicating Dustin and Lucas who were now exiting the car. "But you and I have got another stop to make, Wheeler."

"What?" He was really confused now.

"As it happens, I gotta go into work for a while," the Chief explained. "Crime don't stop just because it's Christmas. And I don't want El to be by herself today, so I figured you could keep her company. Then we'll all come back here and have dinner with everyone else."

Mike couldn't be hearing this right. Because it sounded as though Hopper was going to go out, and he and El were going to be *alone*, for the first time in *forever*. What he'd been hoping for since they day she came back to him.

"Those three," Hopper jerked his thumb to Dustin, Lucas and Will, who were watching the scene unfold with rapt attention, "have assured me that you'll conduct yourself in an appropriate manner. But I want to hear it from you first, before we go anywhere."

"You're going to let me see her?" asked Mike, faintly. "Just me and her? On our own?" He could hardly dare to believe it.

"Are you going to make me regret it?"

"No, sir. Thank you."

Hopper chuckled. "Oh believe me, this wasn't my idea," he said, indicating the other three once again, and Mike instantly understood. The guys had set this up for him, given him this rare opportunity as their Christmas gift to him. He didn't know whether to feel embarrassed or grateful, as he imagined it had taken no small amount of convincing in order to get the Chief to agree. But they'd done it. They were pains in the ass sometimes, but they were also the best friends ever.

It seemed to take far too long to reach the cabin, and from about the halfway point, Mike was leaning forward in his seat to read the road signs, and figure out exactly how much longer it would take to get there. Finally, after what felt like an age, they were walking up the front steps. They could hear soft Christmas carols playing inside the cabin.

"I haven't told her you're coming," said Hopper, brushing snow from the brim of his hat. "This is a surprise for her too."

He executed the secret knock. After a moment or two, the locks slid

back and the door opened. El's curious brown eyes peeped out and then lit up when she saw Mike standing there. Ignoring Hopper completely, she flung her arms around him, giggling with delight.

"Mike! Are you my present?"

Mike chuckled. "Yeah, El, I guess I sort of am. Am I a good one?"

She nodded, gazing up at him with such clear adoration that even Hopper wanted to smile at the sight.

"The best," she said, and stood on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on his cheek. Mike immediately froze, and Hopper bit back a laugh. Maybe he didn't have as much to worry about from this kid as he'd initially thought. That simple gesture from El had made him practically catatonic, so it was unlikely that he'd be thinking about going much further right now. That was a relief. And they sure were crazy about one another.

"I'm going now," he said, breaking in before they forgot his existence altogether. "I should be back in around two hours. "And Wheeler-

Mike reluctantly turned away from El to look Hopper in the eye.

"-Remember what we talked about."

To his credit, Mike held his gaze. "Will do, sir."

"Good. You kids have fun, but not *too much*."

El laced her fingers through Mike's, effortlessly regaining his full attention. "How can we have *too much* fun?" she asked, innocently. Wasn't fun a good thing?

Mike turned beet red, and Hopper couldn't help but laugh.

"I'll let you explain that one, kid," he said to Mike. "See you later." As he closed the door behind himself he heard El repeat the question, and Mike's splutter of embarrassment. Yes, he thought, they were going to be fine.

El, Mike and Hopper arrived at the Byers' Christmas party later that afternoon. The former two seemed to nearly glide through the front door, hand in hand, in a haze of lovey-doveyness and happiness.

It was almost enough to make you sick, if it hadn't been so adorable. Even Lucas and Dustin thought so.

El was wearing a shining silver necklace, and the hand that wasn't gripping Mike's was playing with the snowflake pendant that was hanging from it. Mike was looking at her with a mixture of fondness and pride, that turned to embarrassment when she caught him staring and beamed at him.

They'd used every moment of those precious two hours. To talk to laugh, to just enjoy being together. To hug each other as much as they wanted, to be as close as they wanted to be without having to worry about what anyone else thought. It had been the perfect time for Mike to give her the present, so he had.

She'd told him that she didn't a necklace to remember the Snow Ball, but she was glad she had it anyway. It was pretty, and it made her happy, just like Mike himself.

It had been the kind of moment they would both look back on fondly for years to come.

When El walked into the kitchen to greet Joyce, Mike approached his friends, who were sitting around the tree, scoping out the presents.

"I don't know what to say," he said. On the one hand, the idea of them petitioning Hopper on his behalf was so humiliating he could punch them. On the other, it was probably the best gift they'd ever given him.

"You don't have to say anything," Lucas haughtily. "Just remember this moment next time you try to steal the last slice of pizza."

"Or pretend you've 'lost' one of my comics so you can keep it for longer," said Dustin, with a smirk. At Mike's look of guilty surprise,

Dustin added, “yes I knew. You’re a crappy liar, Mike.”

“You’re welcome,” said Will, simply.

“Why did you do it anyway?” asked Mike, as he sat down next to him. “There had to be easier stuff you could get me.”

“Buying presents for you is a nightmare,” said Lucas. “And besides, you needed our help.”

“I did not!”

“Dude, somehow you’ve managed to get a girl that is so out of your league, you’re not even in the same universe as her,” said Dustin. “Like, she’s a freakin’ superhero! Wheeler, you need all the help you can get.”

“You know she’s not actually my girlfriend, right?” said Mike. He hoped she would be, one day, but they weren’t quite there yet. He didn’t want to rush her into anything.

El emerged from the kitchen holding a bowl of peas that she was taking to the table. She was pulling a face because she hated peas, but she wanted to help Joyce so she was doing her best not to be grossed out. The boys chuckled at the sight. Her necklace caught the glow of the firelight, and Mike felt as though he would burst from happiness. She was here. She was *home*. She wasn’t going to leave again.

“It’s only a matter of time,” said Lucas, noticing Mike’s faraway expression, and rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, but this one’s up to you,” said Dustin. “We did our part, but that question, you gotta ask yourself.”

Mike glanced over at El again, who was placing the peas on the table with the greatest reverence, even though they were gross. She was always like that, so mindful of other people’s wishes even when she didn’t agree with them, so eager to make people happy. Even after all she’d been through. And she looked at him like *he* was the most amazing person on Earth. How the hell did scrawny, nerdy Mike Wheeler ever get so lucky?

“Deal,” he said.

Author's Note:

I hope you enjoyed this piece. Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays and best wishes to you and all of your families.